

Second Sunday after Pentecost (a)
Exodus 19:2-8a Romans 5:1-8 Matthew 9:35—10:8
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
June 14, 2020 (Online only—Quarantine)

Which groups we identify with in this world plays a big role in our sense of who we are, as human beings. God created us to be deeply social creatures, closely connected with each other, and every human being, no matter how much he tries to be an island unto himself, identifies himself with a group, with some kind of family, with some kind of team. The “we” we belong to is very important.

I personally have become more careful about how I use the word “we,” because I’m understanding more and more through experience, as the years go by, which team I really belong to. I don’t feel limited by that. It’s a blessing. I’m becoming more and more confident in my group identity. First of all, I belong to Jesus through baptism, and that means I am a member of the apostolic church, wherever that church exists in the world. That’s my number one team. It’s huge, it’s filled with all kinds of people, all different languages, races, socio-economic backgrounds...but through the blood of Jesus Christ, we’re blood family. As I grow in my sense of how unique that family is, united in Jesus, I find myself less needy when it comes to being on other teams. It’s not as crushing to me when other people reject what I say, and don’t want me on their team. That’s a beautiful gift from God. Not just being part of Jesus’ family, but also not needing so much to identify with other teams all the time. My identity in Jesus sets me free, it loosens me up, it calms me, it gives me peace. It focuses me. It really helps, especially in times like these when the world is so fractured, so filled with hatred, so loud with competing voices.

The reason I’m talking about “we” today is because in the gospel, we see Jesus sending out his team. He sends his handpicked team of twelve disciples into the world to proclaim the arrival of God’s kingdom, to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. This gospel lesson is a God-send for us right now, because it helps us understand what kind of team we’ve been made part of. God himself has chosen his followers to go out as his team, into the middle of all the other clashing teams out there. First of all, one of the things that makes God’s team unique is that in baptism, God picked you and me to be on it. We didn’t pick this team based on our personal preferences. Sometimes we believers are falsely accused of being arrogant, as in “how dare those Christians claim they’ve been chosen by God.” On the contrary, nothing can be more humbling than being chosen by a Savior who was broken on a cross for everyone, and who now calls us to drop our own agendas and carry his cross and follow him. It’s hard to be arrogant when you’re dead to yourself. And that’s what we are. Baptismal faith in Jesus means the death of the old self and its personal agenda. According to Paul we have died in Christ. We now live to Christ. We now submit ourselves to his service. We follow his plan. We now belong to him, not to ourselves. Obviously we need to be reminded of that every day.

At the same time, I love how in the gospel, we hear each of the original disciples’ personal names: Peter, Andrew, James, and the rest...even Judas, the one who betrayed him. Something I’ve seen first-hand in my years as a pastor is how when a person submits

themselves in service to Jesus, they become more and more free and confident in who God made them to be in the first place, in all their uniqueness. When I'm dead to myself and alive in Christ, I'm not trying to save myself any more. I'm not working to stay on a team any more. God, through the blood of Christ, makes me part of his. I've already died. A dead person doesn't need to cover up his weaknesses. Nor do I have to put so much energy into magnifying my strengths in front of other people to look good. The more my life is about Jesus, and not about me, the more I can be me, and not worry about my many limitations. And as scripture so often shows, when we live to serve Jesus, God will put even our weaknesses to good use. Praise God. It's liberating isn't it? What a fantastic team to be part of!

Along with that, we see in the gospel how Jesus never looks at people impersonally. This is an important point for us today. One common character trait you find among dictators and extremists through history is that they think of people in terms of faceless numbers and they lump them together according to generic biological or political traits—that's how antichrist thinks. The devil thinks in terms of mass numbers and how he can divide and control them; he doesn't care about the real life of individual people. Throughout scripture, we see how God in his infinite majesty wants to be in a very personal relationship with everybody. Jesus teaches crowds, but he really reaches people in a saving, life-changing ways through personal encounters throughout the gospels. In Christ we see how each person is God's masterpiece; each person is infinitely valuable to God. That's why Jesus sends Peter and John and James, and now he sends you and me out into the world. Each one of us is sent out to connect with people in a very personal way for Jesus. That's how this new team works. There's something basically unchristian about lumping big groups of people together without acknowledging each person's uniqueness. We're seeing the long-term results of that kind of non-biblical thinking in our society right now.

And that brings us to that big beautiful word sitting there, shining the light of the kingdom in the gospel lesson. When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them. Compassion. Personally, I find myself not only inspired, but also convicted by that word. When I turn on the TV these days, the first thing I've got to do for the sake of my own soul is to think about my own gut response to what I'm seeing. I know that if my gut response is not coming out of a basic compassion for other people, then I know not seeing people as Jesus sees them. Period. That doesn't mean I should approve of everything I'm looking at, not by a long shot. It just means I need to realign my way of looking at things to come in line with the Word of God. And man, that is a painful and humiliating disciplinary process. But it's always 100% liberating.

Compassion—an unforced willingness to look on people with God's love, an unforced willingness to trade places with them, to listen to them without fear—compassion is a gift of the Holy Spirit working in us. It's God showing one of his essential character traits through us. True compassion is never weakness. It comes straight out of the One who created the universe. One thing I've found very helpful when it comes to realigning myself to reflect Jesus' compassion is to remember the next phrase in the gospel lesson: He had compassion on the crowds of people, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Of course Jesus saw right through to the root cause of that crowd's harassment and

helplessness. We feel lost, angry and helpless when we don't know who to listen to. Our world today is making it extremely hard for people to know who to trust. Remembering that makes it a lot easier to show the compassion of Jesus. People might do really destructive things, but as Christians we know that in the deepest sense, people do evil because they're being manipulated by false shepherds. Let's have compassion. The true Shepherd died for sinners.

This gospel lesson keeps on giving. But one thing in closing: the harvest out there in the world is plentiful, that's why Jesus tells us to pray to Almighty God to send out laborers into the harvest, to plant the seeds of the kingdom. When I turn on the TV, I feel the temptation in myself to get frustrated and even angry. Angry at the whole world. I feel the shadow of harassment and helplessness working on my soul, trying to take away my hope and make me feel like a victim. It's a temptation that the Spirit will chase away from us when we turn to the Word of God. We're not victims. We're disciples. The world as it is right now might be a mess—deep down it always has been. But much more than it being a mess, it's God's world. He loves it, and each and every person in it, and he has given himself away to save it, and he is saving it. It might seem crazy to many, but when we disciples see so many people harassed and helpless, we see doors opening. This is an opportunity to go out in the strength of the Spirit, in the name of Christ, and plant the seeds of the kingdom and to announce in every way we can who the true shepherd is, to our families, our friends, our coworkers, our fellow human beings across the globe. There is only One who can and will bring us back to our true home together in reconciliation and love. Only One. His name is Jesus. Let's remember whose team we are on, and rejoice.